DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 442 PS 021 939

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TITLE	Empowering Communities.
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PUB DATE	22 Sep 90
NOTE	7p.; Paper prepared for the SAAECE Training Forum (September 22, 1990). For related documents, see PS 021 935-943.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Agency Role; Blacks; Community Programs; Community Responsibility; *Day Care; *Disadvantaged; Educational Needs; Financial Support; Foreign Countries; Preschool Education; *Self Help Programs; Technical Assistance
IDENTIFIERS	*Community Empowerment; *South Africa

ABSTRACT

Since most black communities in South Africa have been made powerless because of race and poverty, there is a pressing need to empower the individuals of such communities to take charge of their own destinies, especially in the area of early childhood education and care (educare). Current educare projects are often completely or partially controlled by organizations or people outside of the community. Individuals or groups involved in educare and educational reform can best help local communities not by telling them what to do, but by empowering the community to make its own decisions by providing them with reliable information and support. With appropriate training and support, the South African poor can provide their own educare services. It is only through the empowerment of the disadvantaged that disadvantage itself can be overcome. (MDM)

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EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

by

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Prepared for SAAECE Training Forum - 22 September 1990

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Each and every community has the right and responsibility to take charge of the provision of early childhood education and care for their young children. This means being empowered to make decisions about educare provision.

Empowerment enables people to assume greater capacity, and to gain access to and control over resources which affect their lives. People usually desire power because of an existing imbalance which disables them, alienates them and denies them their basic rights.

This imbalance exists since adults and children in this country have been made **powerless** - robbed of their self-esteem and confidence; denied skills, opportunities and choices; and access to resources - because of race and poverty. These adults include most of the parents of South Africa's 6.5 million preschool children.

The need for empowerment is well expressed by Patsy Govender (1987) who said:

> "It is only when individuals and communities are able to gain control over their lives, when they are (able) to exercise choices and take decisions for themselves, that effective change both of their own and their children's life situation(s) becomes feasible. Thus it is only through the empowerment of the disadvantaged that disadvantage itself can be overcome".

In South Africa various forms of Educare control which exist. In some Projects an outside organisation has full control over the day-to-day activities of the Educare Project. Parents and their wider community have little or no say in running the Project and are expected only to fundraise.

Even here all income generated from fundraising may sometimes go to the outside organisation. The rationale for this approach is patronising - the community needs our help, we must teach them the correct (in other words our) way to do things. This is disempowering.

In the second case, the Educare Project belongs to an outside organisation through membership or affiliation. Here the Project is granted some power, but this is very limited. For example, a parent may sit on the executive committee of the controlling organisation, parents may fundraise and spend the money raised themselves, and they may purchase equipment within a budgeted figure. They do not, however, make policy, employ staff or control income and expenditure. This is disempowering.

In the third case, the Project is controlled by the community and more particularly by the parents. This means that they are responsible for all that happens in the Project. They make policy, employ staff, decide on curricula and programmes, must balance their books, own or rent the building themselves, and account only to the parent body and funders. Clearly this is what we should advocate.

So by community control we do not mean 'in consultation with', 'in partnership with' or 'delegated power'. By community control we mean that the community has full responsibility for policy decisions, and the organisation and management of the Project.

Interacting with a preschool group means; not running their Project for them, not making decisions which they should be making, not controlling them. From Day One, when interacting with a community group, respect their autonomy. This means accepting that our role as a trainer's and resource providers is limited to training, advice-giving and support, and that full decision-making authority lies with the community group. This is difficult for some professionals to handle, given that years of training (usually tertiary) have instilled in many a belief that professionals are there 'to solve people's problems'.

How do we assist the empowering process?

With appropriate training and support, people can provide their own preschool services.

The professional working in the community has a specific role to play in the empowerment process. That role is to pass on information and knowledge, and to thereby equip individuals with the skills required to take power. To empower themselves community members need skills, information and knowledge which professionals, for various reasons, have. The relationship between professional and community is therefore a complementary one. Professionals can best contribute by providing learning opportunities and situations for communities to acquire skills and assume power.

Empowerment is affective at two main levels. Empowerment through the acquisition of skills and knowledge increases the individual's control over her life, her self-esteem and her sense of belonging to the community.

At the organisational level, empowerment means increasing the power of groups so that they gain access to and control over resources.

Executive Committee members learn how to manage - not only financial accountability and all the other competencies so essential to administering any project - but also inter-personal relationships, democratic decision-making, and accountability to the broader parent community whose mandate they carry. These less tangible learnings that result from joint problem-solving and sensitive communication are an invaluable by-product.

We have been talking here about the totally autonomous management of Projects, acquiring skills by practising them, not 'we'll manage for you until you know how,' or 'we'll allow some parents to be on the committee with the experts'.

Who can to be empowered?

Firstly, the Executive Committee of the Project. A major factor in the community Educare Project's progress is effective general organisation management, that is, seeing that :

* the constitution is followed
* meetings are held and well run
* good decisions are made and implemented
* problems are solved
* the building is well maintained
* interpersonal relationships are good
* relations with other organisations in the field are established
* there is a budget.
* the money is well looked after
* fundraising is done

Arising out of the need of communities to run their projects on a sound financial base, Financial Management skills are also vital. Through this, committee Treasurers receive hands-on training in the record keeping (bookkeeping) skills required for sound financial management of Educare Projects. This includes knowing how to set up a recording system, the recording process, operating bank accounts, budgetting, fundraising, and reporting to funders.

Secondly, the staff of the Educare Centre need to be equipped with the skills to effectively work with children. This involves particularly

- child development
- active learning
- room arrangement
- daily programme

Thirdly, the children. Children who've had a good preschool experience grow in self-confidence and self-esteem.

'There is evidence to prove that a high quality preschool educare programme is more likely to produce young adults who

- think for themselves
- understand and solve problems
- concentrate, plan and create
- get on well with others
- listen, share and take turns
- cope with feelings like excitement, fear, anger and frustration
- know, accept and like themselves
- are secure and independent
- are physically strong and well.'

Again we are reminded that -

'It is only through the empowerment of the disadvantaged that disadvantage itself can be overcome'.